

🔧 This month's OSHA "Letter of Interpretation" is now ready 🔧



### **Topic: Forklift Operators with Disabilities (esp. Vision)**

This is a great question - Can somebody with a disability, such as in this case - poor vision be used to operate forklifts?

In the OSHA Letter of Interpretation below we see that OSHA does not specifically address the issue of physical fitness, including issues such as vision.

What OSHA does say at 29 CFR 1910.178(l)(1)(i) is "*The employer shall ensure that each power industrial truck operator is competent to operate a powered industrial truck safely*".

Basically this regulation puts the responsibility of choice on the employer. The problem for many employers is the fear of discrimination, especially in light of ADA (Americans with Disabilities) law.

Lets address ADA Law first. The ADA prohibits discrimination based on physical limitations including eyesight, however a key component of ADA law is the ability of the employer to make a reasonable accommodation for the employee with a disability. There may not be anything physically that an employer could do to compensate for the employees poor eyesight.

The employer could however, assign the employee with poor eyesight to operate a forklift in an outdoor (well lighted) yard with large aisles and open spaces. This same employer may not feel comfortable assigning the disabled employee to operations in an interior warehouse where spaces are tight and pedestrian traffic is common. Allowing the employee to perform forklift operations in this way would satisfy OSHA and ADA regulations.

Also noteworthy and addressed in the Letter of Interpretation is the ANSI Standard B56.1-1969 (Section 6) which reads, "*Operators of powered industrial trucks shall be physically qualified. An examination should be made on an annual basis and include such things as field of vision, hearing, depth perception, and reaction timing*".

Although OSHA did not directly adopt the ANSI standard but OSHA often incorporates ANSI by reference, including ANSI B56.1-1969.

Bottom line - The employer must determine what an employee can safely do and not put that employee or other employees in harms way. If an employee has a physical limitations, the employer must evaluate that disability and look for reasonable accommodations.

October 20, 1976

Mr. Walter Chapman, Director,  
Safety/Security  
Marion Power Shovel Company, Inc.  
617 W. Center Street  
Post Office Box 505  
Marion, Ohio 43302

RE: Your letter dated September 22, 1976 - OSHA 1910.178

Dear Mr. Chapman:

Your letter refers to our standard 1910.178(a)(2). This paragraph deals with design and construction requirements for powered industrial trucks, not with operator qualifications.

~~Our standards contain only minor reference to operator qualifications. In [1910.178(l)(1)(i)] you will read, "Only trained and authorized operators shall be permitted to operate a powered industrial truck." (Correction 02/16/99) ["The employer shall ensure that each power industrial truck operator is competent to operate a powered industrial truck safely, as demonstrated by the successful completion of the training and evaluation specified in this paragraph (l)."] No mention is made of vision requirements. The ANSI Standard B56.1-1969 in Section 6 reads, "Operators of powered industrial trucks shall be physically qualified. An examination should be made on an annual basis and include such things as field of vision, hearing, depth perception, and reaction timing."~~

**[This document was edited on 12/22/00 to strike information that no longer reflects current OSHA policy.]**

While OSHA did not adopt this requirement, it merits your consideration. People with only one eye do not generally have good depth perception; this could be a most important and critical matter in some industrial operations. You, as an employer, must determine if full vision is mandatory in your operations. We suggest you consult with your company's medical department.

In closing we remind you that the standard does not apply to vehicles intended primarily for earth moving or over-the-road hauling. Please contact us if we can be of further service.

Very truly yours,

Nicholas DiArchangel  
Acting Regional Administrator  
for Occupational Safety and Health

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